



People First Language

The intent of the HCBS settings regulations is to ensure that individuals receiving HCBS through Medicaid have full access to the benefits of community living and receiving services in the most integrated setting.¹ **These new requirements focus on the experience of the individual and ensuring the setting has the qualities of community versus the qualities of an institutional setting.** Language used to describe individuals, including where they live, the services they receive and how they receive those services, should reflect the characteristics of community, respect and dignity for the individual receiving services.

Here are some general suggestions for speaking to and about people with disabilities in a manner that respects who they are as individuals. Although each person has her or his own style of communication, these guidelines may assist with interactions.

In referring to people with disabilities, it is preferable to use language that focuses on their abilities rather than their disabilities. Therefore, the use of the terms "handicapped," "able-bodied," "physically challenged," and "differently abled" is discouraged. To demonstrate respect and dignity, it may also be helpful to keep the following points in mind when communicating with or about people with disabilities:

Never use the article "the" with a specific disability to describe people with that disability. The preferred term, "people with disabilities," stresses the humanity of the individuals and avoids objectification. If it is appropriate to refer to a person's disability, be sure to use the correct terminology for the specific disability.

Example: NOT "the blind"

USE "people who are blind"

Be wary of implying that people with disabilities deserve to be pitied, feared, or ignored, or that they are somehow more heroic, courageous, patient, or "special" than others who do not have a disability.

Never use the word "normal" to refer to people who do not have a disability in contrast to people with disabilities. Use "non-disabled" instead.

Example: NOT "Jane did as well on the exam as the normal students."

USE "Jane did well on her exam."

Avoid using terms that define a person's disability as a limitation.

Example: NOT "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair bound"

USE "wheelchair user" or "uses a wheelchair"

Terms such as "victim" or "sufferer" should not be used to refer to people who have a disability or disease as this is dehumanizing and implies powerlessness. Example: NOT "suffers from Cerebral Palsy"

USE "person with Cerebral Palsy"²

¹ See: <https://www.cms.gov/Newsroom/MediaReleaseDatabase/Fact-Sheets/2014-Fact-sheets-items/2014-01-10-2.html>

² Brown University, Appropriate Terminology. See <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/accessibility-services/resources-teaching-students-disabilities/appropriate-terminology>

Our words and the meanings we attach to them create attitudes, drive social policies and laws, influence our feelings and decisions, and affect people’s daily lives and more. How we use them makes a difference. People First Language puts the person before the disability, and describes what a person has, not who a person is. Using a diagnosis as a defining characteristic reflects prejudice, and also robs the person of the opportunity to define him/herself.³

List of Acceptable Terms

Acceptable	Terms to Avoid
Person with a disability	Cripple, cripples – the image conveyed is of a twisted, deformed, useless body
Disability, a general term used for functional limitation that interferes with a person’s ability, for example, to walk, hear or lift. It may refer to a physical, mental or sensory condition	Handicap, handicapped person or handicapped
People with cerebral palsy, people with spinal cord injuries	Cerebral palsied, spinal cord injured, etc. Never identify people solely by their disability
Person who had a spinal cord injury, polio, a stroke, etc. or a person who has multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, etc	Victim. People with disabilities do not like to be perceived as victims for the rest of their lives, long after any victimization has occurred
Has a disability, has a condition of (spina bifida, etc.), or born without legs, etc.	Defective, defect, deformed, vegetable. These words are offensive, dehumanizing, degrading and stigmatizing
Deafness/hearing impairment. Deafness refers to a person who has a total loss of hearing. Hearing impairment refers to a person who has a partial loss of hearing within a range from slight to severe. Hard of hearing describes a hearing-impaired person who communicates through speaking and spear-heading, and who usually has listening and hearing abilities adequate for ordinary telephone communication. Many hard of hearing individuals use a hearing aid.	Deaf and Dumb is as bad as it sounds. The inability to hear or speak does not indicate intelligence
Person who has an intellectual or developmental disability	Retarded, moron, imbecile, and idiot. These are offensive to people who bear the label.

³ The Arc of the United States: See <https://www.thearc.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=2523>

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Acceptable	Terms to Avoid
Use a wheelchair or crutches; a wheelchair user; walks with crutches	Confined/restricted to a wheelchair; wheelchair bound. Most people who use a wheelchair or mobility devices do not regard them as confining. They are viewed as liberating; a means of getting around
Able to walk, see, hear, etc.; people who are not disabled	Healthy, when used to contrast with "disabled." Healthy implies that the person with a disability is unhealthy. Many people with disabilities have excellent health.
People who do not have a disability	Normal. When used as the opposite of disabled, this implies that the person is abnormal. No one wants to be labeled as abnormal
A person who has (name of disability.) Example: A person who has multiple sclerosis	Afflicted with, suffers from. Most people with disabilities do not regard themselves as afflicted or suffering continually.
He has Down Syndrome	He's a Down's boy or the Down's boy or he's a Mongoloid
Individual without disabilities	Normal
Brain Injury	Brain Damaged
Accessible parking or bathrooms	Handicapped parking or bathrooms
Home	Facility (when referring to a group home or other community based residential setting)
Person Centered ISP	Treatment Plan
Person who is successful, productive	Has overcome his/her disability, is courageous
Person of short stature	Midget
Person with epilepsy or a seizure disorder	The epileptic

Additional Resources

<http://www.ttacnews.vcu.edu/2011/05/put-me-first-the-importance-of-person-first-language/>

<https://www.disabilityisnatural.com/people-first-language.html>

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/disabilityposter_photos.pdf